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# The School of Nisibis: an ancient religious community?

For the first modern scholars, the School of Nisibis constituted a primitive form of what they believe to be an early university. For this reason the School became known as a "theological academy" and many people still think that the community at Nisibis should be understood as a school similar to our modern institutions of advanced education.[1] The trouble with this view is its anachronism. It can be very deceptive to reduce past cultural phaenomena to what we know from our own times. The aim of this paper is to place the School of Nisibis in the context of similar ancient institutions and thus properly understand its idea of education and the spiritual formation it offered to its disciples. The first part of this paper will thus focus on reconstructing the educational process which took place at the School as described in its *Canons* (also known as the *Statutes*).[2] Then the community from Nisibis will be compared to other ancient communities active in the field of religion and education.

For the past few years the research on the School of Nisibis has considerably advanced with the publication of the works of Adam Becker who has analysed the School in the context of late antique Persian Christianity as well as the late antique education in general.[3] Thus the aim of this paper is only to add one more comparative dimension to our already comprehensive knowledge of the School.

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[1] N. W. Pigulewska, *Kultura syryjska we wczesnym średniowieczu*, Warszawa 1989 (original edition: Moscow 1979).

[2] *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, edited, translated and furnished with a commentary by A. Vööbus, Stockholm 1961 (quotations from the Canons are given in the author's translation with page numbers from Vööbus's edition). Although the present text of the Canons was formed through more than one redaction, it will be treated as a coherent text setting out the mature educational ideas of the School.

[3] A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom. The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia*, Philadelphia 2006; R. Macina, "L'homme à l'école

## The educational and spiritual formation
## at the School of Nisibis

First of all, one should try to find out how the School imagined a perfectly educated man and by what means it believed this ideal could be accomplished. The *Prooimion* (Introduction) to the *Canons* makes it very clear that a genuinely "good man" is the one who seeks and listens to the will of God and is determined to withstand the enticements of his own will. The aim of the whole process of formation at the School is, as a result, geared at discerning and following the Will of God: "The reason for this instruction is the fact that the mortal nature – as long as it is in the mortal state – needs and does not have by nature foundation in the knowledge; education and understanding of the immortal life. Therefore, [the people] hold back the passions of the mortal state, because of its natural disposition and the expectation of its hope, although they are tired by the enticement [of temptations] which are inside a man much more the enemy who is outside and encourage the mind [of the mortal state] to err after the lusts which are not proper for his freedom (ܚܐܪܘܬܐ). For this reason, a reprimand is appropriate for him and correction is desired for him and admonition helps him – they guarded him and encouraged to not to neglect and cease from the service of his life. For this servant is diligent, [who is] a nature both articulate and rational, if he wants to probe into the art of reasoning. And although the will is placed unconstrained between good and evil, the love for good which is within it compels it when it wants [something]. Thus, in this discerning [attitude] of the mind [the will] admonishes itself and praises its Creator" (*Canons, Introduction*, pp. 61–63).

From this passage it clearly follows that the human being in this world is not perfect and requires instruction in order to be able to choose good and thus please his Creator. The instruction which is needed was given to the humans by the Creator himself: the word of God helps one discern between good and evil. Interestingly, according to the author of the *Introduction*, the true reason of the moral crisis at the School which led to the establishment of the new canons was the fact that the members of the School sought support from men and because of the fact that they both lost the power of reasoning and the power embedded in the Scriptures (*Canons*, p. 66).

Consequently, in order to be able to listen to the Will of God, an ideal human being (i.e. an accomplished disciple of the School) is always zealous and steadfast in the study of the Scriptures. The "diligent and steadfast" are constantly praised in the *Canons* whereas the "lazy and reluctant to do what is proper" are always reprimanded (e.g., *Canons*, p. 59). The *Canons* themselves

are described as a means of inspiration and encouragement for the diligent and a barrier for the "careless" (p. 53).

Such an educational ideal required a particular instruction method and specific organisation of the whole formation process. The Bible was the basis of education and the source of models to follow. When the author of the *Introduction* to the *Canons* presented arguments explaining why the particular way of resolving a conflict within the School had been chosen, he wrote that the School had not "gone beyond the logic of the Scriptures" in its choice and that the whole community "follows the straight path of their words" (p. 67). The role of the Bible is even clearer when one bears in mind that the background of the conflict which forced Narsai to quit Edessa and found his school in Nisibis towards the end of the 5th century was a controversy in the Biblical exegesis which made him detested by the rest of the Syriac Christian teachers in Edessa.[4] The new School was always to be headed by an exegete who commented the Scriptures according to the historic approach of Theodore of Mopsuestia (rather than the allegorical "Western" method). Thus, through learning the story of the creation and the salvation a student would become prepared to discern the Will of God in his own life.[5]

The study of the Scripture was only one of several instruments of spiritual and educational formation developed at the School. All the members of this community had to live together and be obedient to the common habits as set out in the *Canons*. Those who trespassed the rules were to be excluded from the community (*Canons*, *Introduction*, pp. 69–70).[6] Moreover, the community of the School remained autonomous – it was governed by both the head teacher and the servant of the House who were elected by all who were "inside" the School (the ܓܘ of the School) (*Canons*, *Narai's 1*, pp. 73–74). The "brothers" were expected to live together and to abstain from participating in the life of the city (*Canons*, *Narai's 10*, p. 80). Finally, the Canons included a requirement that if one of the brothers "wants to thrive,[7] he shall go to a monastery or into a desert/solitude" (*Canons*, *Henana's 4*, p. 94). By this means the dividing line

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[4] A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, op. cit., pp. 41–76.

[5] Cf. the succession of teachers from the times of Adam, through Moses and Jesus, to Theodore of Mopsuestia in the Cause of the Foundation of the Schools (English translation: *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, translated with an introduction and notes by A. H. Becker, Liverpool 2008).

[6] ܥܡܘܕܦܘܗܬܐ ܕܬܚܒܝ (the words which are used to refer to the punishment for trespassers) means remaining in the Eucharistic communion, *communio Christi*. It rather designates a particular community celebrating the liturgy (in our case, the community of the School) rather than the Church in general.

[7] According to *Thesaurus Syriacus*, ܝܬܪ in ETHPA means "abundare factus est, exuberavit, excelluit, utilitatem percepit," always in positive contexts. Thus, here it designates the desire to excel in ascetic practices or other individual acts of piety which are proper for the monastic life, but not for the life in the community of the School.

between the community of the School and the monastic movement was drawn. Nevertheless, the process of becoming a "brother" was relatively similar to the monastic initiation: one had to present himself to the servant of the House, as well as to the "brothers" (possibly meaning a meeting of the whole community) (*Canons*, *Narai's 7*, p. 95).

The last aspect of the organisation and self-definition of the School is the way it viewed itself in the relation to the Divine struggle with the evil. The *Introduction* to the *Canons* leaves no doubts that the School considered itself involved in this reality and reckoned that the devil worked against the fulfillment of the ideals of the School. The creation of the *Canons* themselves is explained as due to the "evil action of the Enemy and the plenty of sins of those who are inside [the School]" (*Canons*, *Introduction*, p. 53). The devil is described as the one who unsettles the covenant[8] which was at the core of the human-Divine relationship and the creation of the School itself (*Canons*, *Introduction*, pp. 52–3). Moreover, the founding act of the School, the exile of the original community of Narsai from Edessa, is described as the result of the devil's envy (*Canons*, *Introduction*, p. 57). Consequently, it is not surprising that the community of the School was convinced that its existence and mission was given by God Himself.

"And thus in the generosity of the mind of our Creator he[9] renewed our nature so that it could receive and grow rich in what is needed for education and correction of its rationality according to its natural disposition. And his love, abundant for all the generations of the sons of man, he showed since the inception in the word which was heard in the time (καιρός) of its working, as well as [he showed it] repeatedly either in [turning] his attention and providential care to us, or in granting precepts and laws, or in other deeds of his goodness towards us" (*Canons*, *Introduction*, p. 61).

## The School in its ancient context

The world of the classical education in Late Antiquity seems not to be the proper context for analysing the phenomenon of the School of Nisibis. Although the basic educational mechanism of the School of Nisibis and schools existing in the cities of the Later Roman Empire at first glance looks identical (transmitting a certain canon of knowledge structured by a set of literary texts), there existed

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[8] ܩܝܵܡܐ meaning a "covenant" is one of the fundamental notions of the Syriac spirituality – see A. Uciecha, *Ascetyczna nauka w "Mowach" Afrahata*, Katowice 2002; A. Vööbus, "*The Institution of the Benai Qeiama and Benat Qeiama in the Ancient Syrian Church*," *Church History* 30 (1961), pp. 19–27; S. A. Zayd, *Ihidayutha. A study of the life of singleness in the Syrian Orient, from Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A. D.*, Oxford 1993.

[9] Either God the Father or the Son. The latter reading seems more probable, given both the content of the passage and the usage of the verb ܚܕܬ (renew), most often referring to the Son in other texts.

several substantial differences. First of all, despite the fact that the education at Nisibis obviously helped its disciples to communicate with other educated people, the attitude towards the texts which formed the core of the curriculum were completely different. The Nisibis community considered its canonical texts (the Bible) to be sacred. Moreover, hardly could the late antique schools be said to realise a programme of spiritual or human formation, whereas a disciple from Nisibis would receive a very complex education which concentrated around both the intellectual sphere and the moral upbringing. Finally, community life was virtually absent from the world of late antique education, apart from some particular philosophical milieus in which disciples lived together with their master or probably similarly organised great centres of learning, such as Alexandria, Berytos or Athenes.

Consequently, the proper context should be sought elsewhere than the world of the late Roman schools. In reality, an educational phenomenon which most resembles the School of Nisibis could be found in Hellenistic and early Roman Palestine. The Qumran community was likewise formed of disciples and teach-ers who had to obey particular written rules of community life and respect its internal hierarchy. All of its members concentrated their efforts on studying the Word of God, the law and the precepts, and thus they strived for perfect lives in the eyes of God.[10] Like at Nisibis, at Qumran the head teacher, the master, was responsible for the whole process of education. His responsibility is clearly described in the verses on the blessings of the Divine teaching in which the *Community Rule* of Qumran culminates:

"I will impart/conceal knowledge with discretion
and will prudently hedge it within a firm bound
to preserve faith and strong judgment
in accordance with the justice of God.
I will distribute the Precept
by the measuring-cord of times,
and … righteousness
and loving-kindness towards the oppressed,
encouragement to the troubled heart
and discernment to the erring sprit,
teaching understanding to them that murmur" (X 20–XI 30, p. 114).

Thus, the aim of this community was to further the understanding of the Divine teaching, as "God loves knowledge" (*The Damascus Document* II 5, p. 130) and its head's primary responsibility was to comment the Divine Scriptures and explain the rules of the covenant. In this way, he could form the minds of his

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[10] *The Community Rule* (1QS) I 10–20 (p. 99); III 10–15 (p. 101); IX 15–25 (p. 110). I am using the English translation by G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, London 2004.

disciples. However, the regular instruction was not the only means of spiritual and educational formation. Members of the community were encouraged to live together: "The man of lesser rank shall obey the greater in matters of work and money. They shall eat in common and bless in common and deliberate in common" (*Community Rule*, VI 1–5 p. 105). In this way those who were obedient to the rules of the Qumran community could be truly obedient to the God's Covenant and fight with Belial and the sons of darkness.

The striking parallels between the two communities, Nisibis and Qumran, points towards an important conclusion: the School of Nisibis should be seen as a classical ancient religious community rather than a predecessor of medieval institutions of advanced learning.[11] Apart from the Qumran community, it shares many similarities with other philosophical-religious communities of Antiquity, like the Pythagoreans or the *therapeutai* of Philo of Alexandria. Yet, it is worth noticing that the Nisibis community used the word "school" (Syriac ܐܣܟܘܠܐ, translation of the Greek σχολῆ) as much as the word "congregation" (ܟܢܘܫܐ; the Qumran community also described itself as a "congregation"). However, it does not necessarily mean the same as the modern word "school." Greek σχολῆ refers to leisure, disputation and study. In late antique texts, it was used to denote a group to whom lectures were given, especially philosophical instructions (σχολῆ ἔχειν).[12] In the early ecclesiastical writings, it meant a group (e.g., a group of catechumens), a party, or a theological school (used, for instance, of a heretic in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* or Epiphanius of Salamina's work on heresies).[13] The use of this word in the self-identification of the Nisibis community points in the same direction as the comparison with other ancient religious communities concerned with their own learning.

The School of Nisibis should thus be numbered among several ancient religious communities, called sects by some scholars,[14] which combined spiritual formation with intense study. Even though the universities of the medieval West initially embodied the same idea, soon they developed into significantly different institutions and considering the great Syriac School of the Persian Christians to be similar to our modern European institutions of higher learning is an obvious anachronism. The aim of the School was to form its disciples through instruction, spiritual training and community life; this complex effort was supposed to prepare them to follow the Will of God in their lives.

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[11] For instance, J. Taylor (*Pythagoreans and Essenes. Structural Parallels*, Paris 2004) considers both the Pythagoreans and the Essenes, though formed in completely different religious environments, to belong to the same world of ancient religious-educational communities.

[12] *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, Oxford 1996, s.v. σχολῆ.

[13] G. W. H. Lampe, *A patristic Greek lexicon*, Oxford 1968, s.v. σχολῆ.

[14] W. Burkert, *Craft versus Sect. The Problem of Orphics and Pythagoreans*, [in:] *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 3: *Self-Definition in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. by B. F. Meyer, E. P. Sanders, London 1981, pp. 1–22.